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# DANTE'S

## Attitude Toward the Church

and

## The Clergy of His Times

BY  
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## DANTE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE CHURCH AND THE CLERGY OF HIS TIME

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### I.

#### DANTE'S ORTHODOXY.

“DANTE is ours,” wrote Pope Benedict XV to the Arch-bishop of Ravenna, in his Encyclical encouraging him to make fitting preparations for the celebration this year of the sexcentenary of the death of the immortal poet.

The words may be regarded as an affectionate tribute, expressing the obligation of all Italy to the genius of Dante, its supreme poet, and the father of its common tongue. For centuries stately Latin had been the spoken language of educated Europe and the vehicle of its literature. Dante himself, upholding the supremacy of the ancient tongue for nobleness, strength, and beauty, employed it as the medium of his *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *De Monarchia*, and some of his eclogues, and actually began his Divine Comedy in the language enriched by Ovid, Horace, and Virgil. Then, breaking all traditions, he put his undying thought into living Italian and so moulded uniquely the vernacular which up to that time had consisted of dialects rough and limited in vocabulary, fluctuating, confused and corrupt in construction. It has maintained its perfection through six centuries of variations and it still remains the national tongue, the great bond of Italian life. Unlettered peasants not only converse in Dante's native tongue but easily quote lines from his immortal work. Poets and prose writers from Petrarch and Boccaccio down to D'Annunzio and Croce regard Dante's language and style as the great standard of

Italian composition, unsurpassable for chasteness and vigor. So the Roman Pontiff, addressing the Italian people, may well say: "Dante is ours"—Dante, son of Italy, whose undying personality realizes the prediction which Byron has him utter:

My bones shall rest within thy breast,  
My soul within thy language.

But the Holy Father, in making claim to Dante, is looking from a viewpoint that transcends the confines of nationality. As the head of the Church he exhorts the Catholic world to offer homage to Dante because he is without question the supreme poet of Catholicity. The words of the Brief leave no doubt as to the meaning of His Holiness: "There is an added reason why we should celebrate this solemnity: namely, Dante is ours. For the Florentine poet, as everybody knows, combined the study of natural science with the study of religion; he invigorated his mind with the intimate teaching of the Catholic Church; he nourished his spirit with the purest and most sublime sentiments of humanity and of justice. The pangs of exile, the hardships of suffering and political reasons may at times have turned him from equity of judgment, but he himself never deflected from the Christian doctrine. Who can doubt that our Dante so fed the flame of his genius and his political art with the inspiration of Catholic faith when, in a poem almost divine, he sang of the most august mysteries of our religion? It is, therefore, with grateful remembrance and supreme honor that his name ought to be celebrated by all Catholics throughout the world."

Although several of the latter-day Popes extolled Dante for the sublimity of his religious sentiment, it is not too much to say that the words of Pope Benedict XV form, perhaps, the most illuminating document ever issued by the Vatican in favor of Dante's supremacy as a poet. This official recognition also settles for all time the question of Dante's fidelity to the teachings of the Church.

The poet has been proclaimed by some non-Catholics as a precursor of the Reformation, while others assert that the Church is claiming Dante as her own either because his fame is so universal or because his rehabilitation, like Joan of Arc's, is the tardy recognition and reparation of an injustice done to

him by churchmen. Even to some Catholics who know Dante's works only superficially, his attitude toward the Catholic faith and clergy offers not a few difficulties apparently irreconcilable with the profession and practice of a faithful son of the Church. How, for instance, they ask, can Dante be praised as a Catholic when his book *De Monarchia* was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books by the Council of Trent? On the plea that the book contained heresy, it had already been condemned and had been burnt in Lombardy in 1329 by Cardinal Bertrando Del Poggetto, legate of Pope John XXII. Furthermore, a prohibition against all of Dante's works was made by a provincial council of the Dominicans held at Florence in the year 1335. About that time a Dominican, Guido Vernani, had written his *Contra Dantem*, a work more passionate than logical. In it Dante's orthodoxy was impugned. The Friars Minor had accused the poet, dead at the time, of heresy and had summoned him to appear before the Inquisition to make an act of faith.

How can Dante be ours, since he consigns among the Heretics, in Circle VI of his *Inferno*, Pope Anastasius II? Him he enclosed in a tomb bearing the inscription: "I hold Pope Anastasius, who was drawn from the right way by Photinus" (Inf. XI, 89.) To hold now that a pope is a heretic strikes at the very foundation of the constitution of the Church which has the guarantee of Christ for inerrancy of magisterial authority. Furthermore, Dante was condemned to pay a heavy fine and to be perpetually excluded from any political office at Florence and to the stake if he returned to that city, because, among other charges brought against him, it was said that he had manifested hostility to the Church. His denunciation of the ecclesiastical abuses of his times took on greater vehemence after his banishment. In his *Divine Comedy*, cradled into immortal poetry by the injustice of his exile, he passes judgment upon several contemporary popes by assigning them to Purgatory and Hell.

In *Purgatorio* Pope Hadrian V is seen among the Avaricious, Pope Martin IV among the Gluttonous; and among the Neutrals in Outer-Hell Celestine is recognized by the majority of modern interpreters. In the *Inferno* proper, among the Simoniacs is seen Pope Nicholas III, who prophesies that to

the same infernal circle will come his successors Boniface VIII and Clement V.

However much these facts may seem to imply either the deflection of Dante from the teachings of the Church or his disregard of her clergy, his theological attitude, as revealed by his writings and life, is wholly orthodox. The conviction is expressed by England's foremost Dantean scholar, Dr. Moore, a non-Catholic, that "there is no trace in Dante's writings of doubt or dissatisfaction respecting any part of the teaching of the Church, in matters of doctrine authoritatively laid down." This also expresses the thought held by such well-known Dantean authorities, as Scartazzini, Vernon, Fletcher, Dinsmore, Grandgent. All of these declare that he is essentially Catholic in both his private and literary life, and they look upon his *Divine Comedy* as a poetical exposition of Catholic philosophy and theology—a poem that is, in the words of Carlyle, "a great supernatural world-cathedral piled up there, stern, solemn, awful."

Nothing was further from Dante's mind than to teach heresy. An illuminating insight into his characteristic attitude toward the doctrine of the Church is furnished by an episode following an interview with Piccarda, in the Heaven of the Moon, who leaves the poet entangled in two perplexities. Why should nuns, forcibly torn from their convents for marriage, receive from Divine Justice a lesser degree of reward than would have been theirs if they had persevered in their vows? And if the Elect are found in the different planets, does that imaginary fact confirm the theory of Plato who held that the souls, in order to inform human bodies, come from the planets con-natural with them and return thereto?

Dante is so fearful that heresy may infect his readers that he proceeds at once, through Beatrice, to answer the second question first, because it contains a pernicious theological error, "quella che più ha de felle" (Par. IV, 28). It is the same question which later brought Botticelli's famous picture of the Assumption under ecclesiastical suspicion. I am not here concerned with the answer given by Dante through Beatrice that the Empyrean, the abode of God and the Angels, is the only true Paradise and that the Nine Heavens of the planets are only poetic devices employed to represent the vary-

ing degrees of merit of the Saints in the true Heaven. What I do wish to stress is the fact that Dante sees heresy in the Platonic theory of the preëxistence of the soul and the return of it to the planet from which it is supposed to have come—a heresy fatal to free will and morality. At once he directs his thought to the explanation of the baneful doctrine, leaving for later consideration the less dangerous question concerning Divine Justice. This characteristic disposition toward orthodoxy upon the part of Dante is further confirmed by his words in which the necessity of faith is declared :

Insensate he who thinks with mortal ken  
To pierce Infinitude which doth enfold  
Three persons in one substance. Seek not then,  
O mortal race, for reasons, but believe  
And be content, for had all been seen,  
No need there was for Mary to conceive. (Purg. III, 34)

Disbelief in immortality is branded by Dante as "the most senseless, vile, and harmful amongst bestialities" (Convito II, 9). He teaches the primacy of the Pope not only of honor but also of jurisdiction : " You have the Old Testament and the New and the Pastor of the Church to guide you. Let this suffice for your salvation " (Par. V, 76). He declares that Heaven ratifies the legislative authority of the Church. Manfred, under excommunication because of his seizure of Sicily, fief of the Holy See, dies making an act of perfect contrition. Saved from eternal damnation he must remain in *Ante Purgatorio* before beginning his purgatorial suffering, thirty times as long as the period of his contumacy, for the law of Heaven giving sanction to the Church's censures is, according to Manfred, that one " who dies in contumacy of Holy Church, even though at last he repent, needs must stay outside this bank thirtyfold for all the time that he had lived in his presumption " (Purg. III, 134).

To Dante the Church is the "Spouse of God" (Par. X, 140), "the Spouse of Christ" (Par. XI, 32), "the divine Chariot" (Purg. XXX, 16), "Christ's army" (Par. XII, 37), "the Holy Church" (Purg. III, 137), "which cannot in any way lie" (Conv. II, 4-32).

To Dante the Pope is "the successor of Peter" and he truly has "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (De Mon. III, I, 43-44). He is "the Vicar of God" (De Mon. III, I, 42),

the "Vicar of Christ" (Purg. XX, 87), and the instrument of the Holy Ghost (Par. XI, 98). He is "the Supreme Pastor of the Church" (Par. V, 77), "the true guide of the faith" (Par. VI, 16-21). For Dante the Pope never dies because St. Peter in his successors "still lives" (Par. VIII, 132).

Before expressions so full of incontestable faith as these, one may wonder how Dante's orthodoxy ever came under a cloud. The first ground that might lead one to suspect his fidelity to the teachings of the Church is furnished by episodes connected with his book *De Monarchia*. The work indeed was placed on the Index by the Council of Trent (which was held over two centuries after Dante's death), not because of heresy but from the fact that it was considered a dangerous book in the hands of the Church's enemies.

*De Monarchia* is a treatise in which Dante contends that the authority of the Church should be restricted to purely spiritual matters, while the empire should prevail as a universal monarchy. "Man had need of a twofold directive power," writes Dante, "according to his twofold end, to wit, the Supreme Pontiff to lead the human race to eternal life in accordance with things revealed, and the emperor to direct the human race to temporal felicity in accordance with the teachings of philosophy." The Holy Roman Empire he identifies with the Roman empire established by divine right as a single supreme monarchy for the temporal happiness of mankind. To oppose that empire is to oppose the will of God. The papacy is equally divine, independent of the empire in things spiritual, and its sovereignty cannot by divine law embrace the possession of temporalities. The emperor, however, may confer patrimony and other things if he keep his own dominion intact, and the Pope may receive them as needed to promote the mission of the Church ("pro Ecclesia proque Christi pauperibus"). But it was wrong for the Emperor Constantine to confer on Pope Sylvester and his successors the sovereignty of Italy and of the West, because he was incompetent to alienate the dominion of that with which by divine right he had been entrusted. Besides, the Pope had neither the right nor the power to accept the Donation, because "it is folly to suppose that God wishes to be received that which he forbids to be offered" (*De Mon.*, Bk. III, XIII).

This so-called Donation of Constantine Dante regards as the beginning of the temporalities of the Church—a donation, he insists, that was the curse of the Church and the source of countless evils. If abiding peace is to come to the world, the Emperor and the Pope must keep to the spheres of activity marked out for them by Heaven. This independence, however, of the spiritual of the temporal must not be taken in a strict and absolute sense, since Dante says in concluding his treatise: "In certain matters the Roman Prince is subject to the Roman Pontiff. For that happiness which is subject to mortality, in a sense is ordered with a view to the happiness which shall not taste death. Let, therefore, Cæsar be reverent to Peter, as the first-born son should be reverent to his father, that he may be illuminated with the light of his father's grace and so may be stronger to enlighten the world over which he has been placed by Him alone, who is the Ruler of all things spiritual as well as temporal."

A writer in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*<sup>1</sup> contends that Dante's political theory does not deny to the Church the right of temporal power understood in its restricted and formal sense to refer to the Papal states. It does deny the Pope primacy in temporalities. But whatever may have been Dante's theory as to the separation of Church and State, there is no doubt that his *De Monarchia* is historically unsound, not only because of its claim that the ancient Roman Empire was established by divine right and that its Emperor received authority directly from God Himself, but also because of its identifying with the ancient Empire the Holy Roman Empire, the creation of the Pope, who alone crowned and thereby conferred the imperial power upon a monarch after he had taken an oath to perform certain definite obligations both to the Church and his own subjects.

Furthermore there can be no doubt that *De Monarchia* became the source of revolutionary propaganda against the Church and her right to possess property. Only six years after Dante's death Marsilius of Padua, who had studied the book, proposed such heretical doctrines as these: "The Roman Pontiff has no power over any man except with the permission

<sup>1</sup> *Dante's Ideal of Church and Empire*, June, 1891, by the Rev. J. F. Hogan.

of the emperor, while the emperor has power over the pope and the general council. The pontiff can act only as an authorized agent of the Roman people: all the goods of the Church belong by right to Cæsar." <sup>2</sup> Is it any wonder, then, that the book was placed on the Index, seeing that it provided ammunition against the Church?

While this explanation leaves unclouded Dante's orthodoxy, as far as the placing of his book on the Index is concerned, the fact remains that in condemning a pope for heresy Dante runs counter to historical evidence. He seems to have confused Pope Anastasius II with his namesake and contemporary, the Emperor Anastasius I, who is said to have been led into heresy by Photinus, Bishop of Sirmium. The latter taught that Christ had a beginning in Mary; therefore, that he was a mere man; that the Word had no hypostasis but was the quasi-energy of the Father. But if Dante made the historical blunder of confounding an emperor with a pope of the same name, subjectively is he not culpable for condemning a Roman Pontiff for heresy?

There is no doubt that the poet believed in the general doctrine of the infallibility of the Church, "which cannot in any way lie" (Conv. II, 4, 32; cf. Par. VI, 16-21). If he did not hold that the pope, speaking *ex cathedra*, is the organ of infallibility, he was still within his rights as a true Catholic, since there was no obligation to believe in that doctrine until its definition by the Vatican Council, 1870.

## II.

### DANTE'S CRITICAL ATTITUDE TOWARD THE CLERGY.

Coming now to the consideration of Dante's attitude toward the clergy contemporary with him or nearly so, it may be said in general that, while he shows himself to be animated by the highest reverence for the priesthood and the greatest respect for its members who are true to their vocation, his attitude is one of unremitting protest against the vanity of religious orders and of most passionate reproaches for supposed simony against the clergy, including and especially affecting the popes. In each of the three parts of the Divine

<sup>2</sup> *Cath. Encyc.*, IX, 721.

Comedy he shows himself an unsparing censor of such abuses. His expressions, however, burning with shame and sorrow or pointed with ridicule and satire, are the expressions of a son whose heart is scourged, but not of a mocker who rejoices—and they are a high tribute to the religious life, a strong defence of the priesthood and papacy; for his passionate words spring from an ideal so exalted in conception that what appears a mote in a secular he sees to be a beam in a person consecrated to God.

To indicate the extent of avarice in the clergy of his day, Dante, in the fourth circle of his *Inferno*, the most populous circle of all his underworld, addresses Virgil: "My master, now show me what people are these and whether all those tonsured on our left (misers) were of the clergy. And he to me: 'These were priests that have not hairy covering on their heads and popes and cardinals, in whom avarice does its utmost'" (*Inf. VII*, 37).

Dante makes St. Bonaventure condemn the Franciscans, and St. Thomas Aquinas condemn the Dominicans for their degeneracy. The household of St. Francis "who marched straight with feet in his footprints, hath turned round" (*XII*, 115). The Dominicans who maintain the pristine observances of their holy founder are "so few that a little cloth would make their cowls". Speaking of St. Dominic's disciples, the Angelic Doctor says:

But now his flock so eagerly demands  
New food that it, of sheer necessity,  
In pastures widely different strays and stands.  
And as the more his sheep thus scattered lie,  
And further from him wander to and fro,  
With less milk come they for the fold's supply.  
Some are there who, in fear of that loss, go  
Back to their shepherd, but so few they be  
That little cloth would make their cowls, I trow.  
Now if my words are not obscure to thee,  
If thine own ears have been to learn intent,  
If what I said thou call'st to memory,  
In part at least thy wish shall find content;  
For thou shalt see the plant which thus decays,  
Shall see what he, the leather-girded, meant  
By "well he fattens who ne'er vainly strays". (*Par. XI*, 124)

Many modern interpreters understood these words to refer to the moral degeneracy of the Dominicans, but the passage may be more widely interpreted as their deflection from their

doctrinal mission, the study of Sacred Scripture, of the Fathers, and of theology, to concentrate on the study of philosophy and secular science.

Nor do the Benedictines escape Dante's denunciation. St. Benedict (Par. XXII, 76) is made to lament their degeneracy:

That great rule of mine  
 But lives to waste the paper where it lies.  
 The walls which once were as an abbey's shrine  
 Are made as dens of robbers, and the hoods  
 Are sacks filled full with the flour of thoughts malign,  
 And even usury not so far intrudes  
 Against God's pleasure, as those fruits unjust  
 Which fill the monks' hearts with such wanton moods.  
 For what the Church doth hold, she holds in trust  
 For those who in God's name ask charity  
 Not for a kinsman or some baser lust.<sup>8</sup> (Par. XXII, 74)

This scornful hyperbole shows at least that the rule of the founder of the order was waste paper, that the goods of the monastery were given to the kindred of the monks or used for some other vanity or worldliness. Many of the evils complained of were due to the common practice of Commendam, the placing over a monastery, even against the will of the monks, of an abbot who might be a prelate or a layman. Often the youngest son of a nobleman, or a mere military retainer was so rewarded for personal services. It can readily be seen that in some of these cases the abbot had only one thought, that of enriching himself from the revenues of the monks. The consequence was the temporal and spiritual ruin of the monastery. If he assumed active command of the religious, his rule was apt to be worldly, if not tyrannical; and the result could only be a shirking, if not an ignoring, of the rules formulated by the founder of the community. Of course this evil was not unknown to Dante. Referring to the common practice of putting into the sanctuary or into the monk's cells those men who had no aptitude or vocation for the sacred life, he says: "Ye perversely to religion strain him who was born to gird on him the sword" (Par. VII, 151),

<sup>8</sup> A serious thinker must deplore the tendency of some modern editors to read into Dante's expressions a meaning more base than the words themselves may signify. An example is in the case of the editor of *Paradiso* (Temple Classics, p. 279), who, while he gives a literal translation of the phrase, "non di parenti ne d'altro piu brutto" (not unto kindred or other filthier thing), interprets the last words to mean "paramours". So, too, Vernon in his *Readings on the Paradiso*, vol. II, p. 209.

and he gives us a striking instance (Purg. XVIII, 121) which tells of the appointment by Alberto della Scala, Lord of Verona, of his illegitimate son, "deformed in body and mind and basely born" to the abbacy of San Zeno, an appointment which is to bring with it eternal damnation for him who committed this desecration.

### III.

#### DANTE'S CENSURE OF POPES.

If Dante was so severe a censor of the lives of the inferior clergy and of members of religious orders, his invectives against some of the popes of his day are tense with a significance that shows the firmness of his conception that a stain on the white robe, "the great mantle" of a pope, is more to be deplored than a spot on him who dresses in less conspicuous garments. Dante makes St. Peter Damian speak with bitter sarcasm in contrasting the poverty and asceticism of SS. Peter and Paul with the pomp and obesity of the dignitaries of the Pontifical Court.

Cephas and he, the Spirit's vessel true  
 And chosen, barefoot went and mortified,  
 And ate what food chance hostile to them threw.  
 Our modern shepherds need on either side  
 An arm to lead them and strong back to bear—  
 So weighty they!—and on their train to guide:  
 And with their palfreys they their mantle share  
 And so two beasts go underneath one skin. (Par. XXI, 127)

That reproach seems to have been suggested by the words of St. Bernard: "Never have men told that Peter walked adorned with precious stones or vestments of silk or under a gilded canopy or mounted on a white horse or companied by soldiers or surrounded by noisily busy servitors. He thought he needed nothing of that sort to fulfil the saving command: if thou lovest me, feed my lambs."<sup>4</sup>

There are certainly three popes whom Dante, for political reasons, or because he was the victim of misinformation, places in the Inferno. A fourth is to be added if, in that realm called Outer-Hell where are punished those who tried to be absolutely natural by doing no great evil actively, but, on the other hand, by refusing to commit themselves to the responsibilities of life

<sup>4</sup> *De Consid.*, IV, 3.

—if in that realm “the spirit of him who from cowardice made the great refusal” is to be identified as Pope Celestine V, then Dante has placed in the underworld the saintly hermit Pietro di Murrhone, unanimously called by the conclave of Perugia, when he was a nonagenarian, to succeed Nicholas IV in the Chair of Peter which had been vacant for two years and four months. After a few months the cares of office weighed so heavily upon the perplexed old man, yearning for his mountain cave, that he determined to resign. But such an act was so unprecedented that the question was raised “Could a pope resign?” and “Who had the power to accept his resignation?” The matter was settled by Celestine’s following the counsel of Cardinal Gaetani to issue before or simultaneously with his abdication a decree legalizing a papal resignation and making the College of Cardinals competent to accept it. To Dante, who taught that neither pope nor emperor could legally resign, the act of Celestine V in vacating the apostolic see was a crime of great cowardice.

If the shade “of him who, from cowardice, made the great refusal” is to be recognized as that of Celestine V, then Dante’s judgment is in opposition to that of the Church, which in 1313 canonized this hermit pope! An explanation of how the Catholic poet could still consign to Outer-Hell one who had received saintship from the Church is offered by the assumption that, though the finishing touches were not given to the Inferno until after 20 April, 1314, the date of the death of Pope Clement V, to which allusion is made in Inf. XIX, 76-87, the earlier part of the poem including chapter III which contains the episode supposed to refer to Celestine, was completed before the canonization of the latter; or it may be said that Dante, the exile, did not know of the canonization, and that he believed the abdication of Celestine was null and void since it was brought to pass, as he thought, by the designing influence of Cardinal Gaetani who, under the name of Boniface VIII, succeeded to the papal throne.

Dante indeed regarded Boniface as an anti-pope and of all popes he is the object of the poet’s most vituperative passion. He represents even St. Peter as becoming red with anger when he denounced him “who on earth usurpeth now my seat”; and the vast concourse of saints is exhibited as chang-

ing color and reddening with shame in sympathy with the words of the Prince of the Apostles :

And then I heard a voice, "No more admire  
 That thus so changed in hue thine eyes I meet.  
 For as I speak, all those shall change attire.  
 He who on earth usurpeth now my seat,  
 My seat, my seat, I say, which to the eye  
 Of God's dear Son is vacant at His feet,  
 He of my burial place has made a sty  
 Of blood and filth wherein the evil one  
 Who fell from heaven, himself doth satisfy". (Par. XXVII, 19)

Nine times does Dante refer to Boniface, but only to stigmatize him with the greater intensity. Boniface is "he who sits and goes astray" (Par. XII, 90); he is "the prince of the New Pharisees" (Par. XXVII, 85); "he is no shepherd but a wolf" (Par. IX, 132). And the poet anticipating the death of Boniface by three years places him in the Hell of the Simoniacs and addresses him through the mouth of Nicholas III with taunting words for his alleged avarice and for the supposed fraud by which he obtained the papacy :

And stand'st thou there upright,  
 Stand'st thou already here, O Boniface?  
 By many years my scroll hath erred from right.  
 Has that ill gain so soon lost all its grace  
 For which thou did'st not fear by fraud to seize,  
 The beauteous bride and work her foul disgrace? (Inf. XIX, 153)

The character of Boniface VIII as painted by Dante is diametrically opposed to that which Cardinal Wiseman vindicates in his *Historical Essays*. To the English churchman Boniface is a pontiff "who devoted the energies of a great mind, cultured by profound learning and nurtured by long experience in the most delicate ecclesiastical affairs, to the attainment of a truly noble end, and who throughout his career displayed many great virtues and could plead in extenuation of his faults the convulsed state of public affairs, the rudeness of his times and the faithless, violent character of many among those with whom he had to deal. These circumstances, working upon a mind naturally upright and inflexible, led to a sternness of manner and a severity of conduct which, when viewed through the feelings of modern times, may appear extreme and almost unjustifiable. But after searching through the pages of his most violent historians, we

are satisfied that that is the only point on which even a plausible charge can be brought against him."

Dante's estimate of Boniface's character was undoubtedly the result in great measure of his being the victim of a loose oral tradition or erroneous written articles, the product of an age wherein historical criticism had not yet developed. The books which give information as to the events of Dante's time are: the *Chronicles of Salimbene di Adamo*, a Franciscan of Parma; the *Memoriale Potestatum* by an anonymous brother of a religious order; *The Annals and Church History of Tolomeo da Lucca*, the Dominican Bishop of Torcello; the *Chronicle of Pipino da Bologna*, a Dominican, the *Chronicle by a Franciscan of Erfurt* and, above all others, the *Chronicles of Giovanni Villani and Ricordano Malespini*. To these must be added the defamatory booklets of the Colonnese Cardinals, notorious for their rebellious conduct to the Holy See. All these works are such a mass of falsehoods and such a tissue of slanders and accusations, especially against Boniface VIII, Nicholas III, and Clement V, that it is no wonder that Dante, receiving as true these tales as they came from the pen or lips of brothers, bishops, and even cardinals, should have consigned those popes to the Inferno. Furthermore Dante's judgment as to the character of Boniface must have been influenced by the shameful charges of heresy, blasphemy, and immorality brought after his death, against the memory of Boniface by Philip the Fair, "the bane of France" (Purg. VII, 109), "the new Pilate" (Purg. XX, 91). These charges were actually considered by a conclave held at Avignon in 1313 and, though the process ended abruptly with the memory of Boniface purged of all adverse charges, the calumnies were never wholly dissipated. In this case, as in so many others, the lie had run over the earth while Truth was getting ready to pursue it.

As affecting the poet's attitude toward Boniface, all these sources of misinformation only added to Dante's antagonism against the Pope, for the latter's intervention in the affairs of Florence. That act brought about Dante's exile and subsequent adversity. The great Florentine's bitter antagonism was further aroused by the political principles and policy of Boniface. As a Ghibelline favoring a wide separation of

Church and State, Dante must have viewed with deep chagrin the scenes connected with the consecration and coronation of Boniface, which showed " King Charles II of Naples and his son Charles Martel, titular king and claimant of Hungary, holding the reins of his gorgeously accoutred snow-white palfrey as he proceeded on his way to St. John Lateran and later, with their crowns upon their heads, serving the Pope with the first few dishes at table before taking their places amongst the cardinals." <sup>6</sup>

The chagrin of the author of *De Monarchia* must have turned to fierce resentment as he read the famous Bull of Boniface, "Ausculta, Fili", which gave occasion for the statement that the Pope claimed supremacy over kings, even in civil matters. Finally there came, we believe, to arouse Dante's passion to the highest pitch, the widely-circulated forged Bull " Deum time ", addressed to Philip, King of France, wherein are contained the arrogant words: " Scire te volumus quod in spiritualibus et temporalibus nobis subes"—we wish thee to know that thou art our subject in spiritual and temporal matters.

Can we expect that a man of Dante's passionate nature would ever forget all sense of his own injuries brought about by Boniface and even ignore all the vituperations uttered against him; and then suddenly raise his voice in defence of this Pope whom he had treated even as an usurper? Yet that inconsistency is the very thing that Dante displayed when he saw that Boniface had been seized at Anagni by emissaries of Philip, the French King, and had been treated with gross indignities. At once, to him, Boniface ceased to be a usurper and became a true pope, the Vicar of Christ! In him a prisoner, Christ Himself he saw, captive, suffering a renewal of His Passion:

In Alagna see the fleur-de-lys,  
Christ, in His Vicar, captive to the foe,  
Him once again as mocked and scorned I see.  
I see once more the vinegar and gall,  
And slain between new robbers hangeth He. (Purg. XX, 84)

Consigned also to the circle of the Simoniacs is Clement V, the second pope after Boniface VIII. Though not mentioned

<sup>6</sup> *Cath. Encyc.*, II, 662.

by name, he is referred to as "the lawless shepherd of uglier deeds" (Inf. XIX, 82), "a new Jason" (Inf. XIX, 85), the allusion being to Jason (II Macc. IV, 7), who bought the office of the high priesthood. In the Terrestrial Paradise the Church, especially under Clement V, is represented as a shameless woman, the recipient of both caresses and blows from a giant (Philip the Fair). Referring to Clement V, a Gascon, and John XXII, a native of Cahors, St. Peter in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars says of them: "Cahorsines and Gascons make ready to drink our blood" (Par. XXVIII, 58). The last words spoken by Beatrice denounce the hypocrisy of Pope Clement and predicts his fearful fate in the Inferno (Par. XXX, 142).

Dante's indignation against Clement was fed by his temperamental Italian soul roused to fury against the French for the removal of the Holy See from Rome to Avignon and for the policy of King Philip the Fair and his baneful influence upon the Pope. It was a time when the Church was in the gravest danger, not only from the anarchic conditions, especially in Italy, but also from the disturbances following the short terms of the popes and the vacancies—some extending nearly three years—in the Apostolic See. One man of Dante's day, Cardinal Matteo Orsini, had seen thirteen popes. It was a time when adverse criticism of rulers, spiritual and temporal, assumed a character of odium the publicity of which modern life cannot well understand. Even so-called saintly persons did not hesitate to use abusive language to those considered unworthy of their high civic or religious offices. The printing press had not yet been invented to spread these scandals; but to have been silent in the presence of these shameful abuses in the Church would have been considered a greater scandal than to have made them known. Proclaiming them, even to the extent of what would now constitute libel, was considered commendable by the medievalists, who acted upon the principle that an abuse made known can be cured, but if allowed to remain hidden it may appear to be tolerated or protected, and this last evil would be worse than the first. Bearing these things in mind and knowing, on the one hand, Dante's disdain for the French and, on the other, his fiery zeal for an unblemished papacy and a Holy Church, we have

an explanation of his vehement treatment of the weak and vacillating Clement V who, unfortunately for the good of the Church, was strongly dominated by Philip the Fair.

Dante, as we said before, places in the Inferno Nicholas III, "an ecclesiastically minded pontiff of great diplomatic ability and, if we except his acts of nepotism, of unblemished reputation."<sup>6</sup> His nepotism loses the feature of excessiveness if we remember that not he but his father was the founder of the great power which was offensive to Dante for political reasons. Under Gregory IX and Innocent IV, Nicholas's father, Matteo Orsini Rosso, a Roman senator and military leader, had saved Rome to the papacy. He was generously rewarded for his services, and took care to promote the fortunes of his family, which soon numbered eight or nine branches, some of which even formed connexions with the nobility. Several nephews of this wealthy Orsini family, acknowledged by all to have been men conspicuous for executive talent or military valor, were appointed by Nicholas to honorable and lucrative positions, and that act translated by the unfriendly into terms of avarice, appears to be the only basis for the evil expressed in the confession which the poet draws from the mouth of Nicholas. "Verily, I was a son of the She-bear (Orsini), so eager to advance the whelps that I pursued wealth above and here put myself in a pocket of fire" (Inf. XIX, 70).

The other accusation brought by Dante against the character of Nicholas III was the charge that, for a monetary consideration received from the Greek emperor, who was eager to lessen the power of Charles of Anjou, the Pope conspired against the latter to deprive him of Sicily. Military operations in Sicily soon followed, executed, it was said, with the countenance and contrivance of Nicholas. Eventually the house of Anjou lost Sicily through the insurrection of the Sicilian Vespers, which occurred two years after the death of Nicholas, and King Peter of Aragon, supposed to be a party to the alleged conspiracy, seized the throne. It is in reference to this supposed conspiracy that Dante addresses the spirit of Nicholas suffering among the Simoniacs: "Therefore stay thou here, for thou art justly punished and keep well the ill-got money which against Charles made thee bold" (Inf. XIX, 97).

<sup>6</sup> *Cath. Encyc.*, XI, 57.

Historical research<sup>7</sup> shows that the charge is a slander against the memory of Nicholas. The several incidents, however, which gave occasion to the report of the supposed conspiracy, contain a certain semblance of truth. It was said, for instance, that John of Procida, disguised as a Franciscan, had come to Soriano to interest Nicholas in the affairs of Sicily. He is said to have acted as an intermediary between the Pope and King Peter of Aragon, offering the latter the throne of Sicily, which was then held by Charles of Anjou. There is no historical evidence that such an offer had been made. On the other hand there is no doubt that Procida was an intermediary between Peter III and the Sicilian nobles, and that Procida was in attendance on the Pope during his illness. Furthermore, there is evidence that both the Pope and Procida were together at Soriano in 1279, at which time a chapter of the Franciscans occurred there.

The first writer to give the substance of the alleged conspiracy as it affected Nicholas III, was the Franciscan Guelf Brother Salimbene, who in 1289, seven years after the Sicilian Vespers, affirmed that Nicholas III, out of hatred for Charles of Anjou, had given Sicily to Peter III. In 1330 some details were added to the statement by the Dominican Pipino da Bologna and about the same time the tale was further embellished with rich detail by Giovanni Villani. In the second half of the fourteenth century the authors of the *Leggenda di Giovanni di Procida* put forth what they pretended was the actual letter written by Nicholas III to Peter of Aragon.

Dante, living in an age when historical criticism was undeveloped, accepted the tale as it had been transmitted by writing or as it had been passed from mouth to mouth, affording here an instance of his unreliability as a historian—a defect that he displays in many cases, notably that of his slander of Boniface VIII in the celebrated episode of Guido de Montefeltro.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See *Il VI Centenario Dantesco, Ravenna*, vol. IV, Aug. 1917, art. "Origine delle Accuse contro Niccolò III e Dante", P. Fidelo Savio, S.J., from which most of the facts here mentioned have been taken.

<sup>8</sup> See "Lunga promessa coll' attender corto", by Eduard Jordan, in *Bulletin Italien*, Vol. XVIII.

It may not be beyond the bounds of truth to assume that the estimate of the character of Nicholas evolved by the imagination of the populace, and shaped by the political prejudices of that age, became Dante's view and that the poet expended upon the memory of Nicholas the resentment which he felt against the Orsini family. To their influence at Rome was due the fact that Dante's ideal monarch, Henry VII of Luxemburg, the one who was to have realized the poet's hope for the restoration of peace and justice, failed to receive the imperial crown at St. Peter's.

## IV.

## DANTE'S PANEGYRIC OF THE CLERGY.

Condemning evil and showing the punishment drawn upon the individual is only one part of what Dante considers to be the divine mission of his vision "to profit the misguided world" (Purg. XXXII, 103). He also offers examples of virtue to serve as a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths. Among the models of priestly virtue signalized in the Paradiso, the poet presents for our admiration and imitation a secular priest Sigier, and three members of religious orders—Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican; Bonaventure, the Franciscan; St. Bernard, the Cistercian. Of the four the last alone had been canonized. Dante's anticipation of the solemn apotheosis which the Church could one day award to Aquinas and Bonaventure is in itself an idealistic tribute to their holiness of life. On the other hand his placing in Paradiso Sigier, a priest of doubtful reputation for orthodoxy, and the dedication to him of two tiercets when often a single word is all that is given to great philosophers and theologians, has not failed to awaken the curiosity and arouse the interest of commentators.

In the first ring or crown of twelve Doctors in the Heaven of the Sun, with Albert the Great on his right and Sigier on his left, Thomas Aquinas points out the latter:

He from whom now turns to me thy regard,  
Is of a soul the light so gravely wise  
It deemed the way to death both slow and hard.  
There Sigier's light eternal meets thine eyes  
Who, lecturing in the street that's named of Straw,  
Unpalatable truth did syllogize. (X, 133)

This Sigier taught the Averrhoistic form of Aristotelianism at the University of Paris at the same time that Aquinas was there arguing against him and propounding Aristotle Christianized. It is a remarkable fact that both professors, upholding from different angles the system of the Stagyrite, came under the condemnation of Stefano Tempier, Bishop of Paris, in 1277, who, acting on 219 propositions, some of which were only philosophical doctrines indifferent to religion, determined, by placing those propositions under the ban of the Inquisition, to strike, not only the Averrhoism of Sigier, but also the Aristotelianism of Thomas. Following the condemnation, Sigier was accused of heresy and was found guilty by the University of Paris, a court very unfriendly to him. Before the judgment could be executed against him he fled to Rome and laid his case before the Roman Curia. Evidently he was exonerated, but suspicion as to his orthodoxy persisted and he was kept under observation. While still under this cloud, his freedom of movement being restricted to Orvieto, the transferred seat of the Roman Curia, he died suddenly at the hand of his servant, an insane cleric. Dante, who lived near Orvieto, must have known that Sigier, who had always protested his innocence of heresy, had subscribed to the act of faith demanded of him by the Roman Curia and had led a penitential life in reparation for whatever evil his intellectual errors may have caused. In any event, Dante wanted a representative of philosophy for his *Paradiso* and none seemed so well known as Sigier. The selection of the latter for the Heaven of the Doctors of the Church may also have been due to a sentimental impulse upon the part of the poet who could not have failed to have been moved by respect for the genius of Sigier, by sympathy for the purity of his intention and by admiration for his fine example of submission to the Church, despite the disgrace of his condemnation and the hardships of his exile.

Four cantos of the thirty-three constituting the *Paradiso* are devoted to the glory of St. Thomas Aquinas. That is not the only means the poet employs to extol the Angelic Doctor and to offer him a tribute of deep devotion and gratitude. The fact that Dante places the crown of the twelve Doctors of whom Thomas is the leader, nearer to Beatrice (*Revelation*),

while the second crown including Bonaventure and John XXI, the only contemporary pope canonized by Dante, is somewhat remote, is taken to signify that, in the poet's judgment, Aquinas has first place as a theologian and that his school, teaching the preëminence of the intellect over the will, is to be followed rather than the mystical school which upheld the doctrine of the superiority of the will over the intellect. Dante not only knew the doctrine of St. Thomas but warmly advocated it, even in the matter of philosophical opinion, using the very arguments put forth by the great Dominican genius himself. The omission from Dante's pages of the names of philosophers so distinguished as Duns Scotus, Ocham, and Raymund Lully, who, in Dante's day, opened a new scholastic era, is significant as showing the poet's championship of the system of St. Thomas as the "master of those who know". And that fact is the more remarkable because, in Dante's age, the opinion of Aquinas was not regarded as the last word on philosophy or theology. The explanation is found in the fact that Dante was doctrinally so much of a Thomist that in him the *Summa* was transfused into the poet.

Is it a wonder, then, that Dante mentions Thomas by name *ten* times and that he refers to him or quotes his words *seven* times? Is it a wonder that, having given him ascendancy in the domain of wisdom, upon earth, he should make Aquinas the foremost sun in the Heaven of the great theologians and of others who loved wisdom? There "the good brother Thomas" (Con. IV, 30) appears still settling the perplexities of his disciple Dante. There (Par. XI, 14) also, Aquinas is heard delivering a masterly eulogy on the life of St. Francis of Assisi, not so much a biography of cold facts as a picture of the inner man, drawn with such consummate art as ever to command the understanding and elicit the sympathy of the reader of every period.

If the Divine Comedy, by reason of its doctrinal matter, is the *Summa* of St. Thomas, it is also the *Itinerarium* of St. Bonaventure by reason of its mysticism. Dante's philosophy of life is like a great Gothic structure composed of variegated stones of different periods. The greatest part of the marble has been taken from the quarries of Thomistic Scholasticism, but here and there we see blocks shaped by Plato, by St. Augus-

tine and, above all, by St. Bonaventure. In building, Dante was not only a philosopher and a theologian, but he was supremely a poet. And as a poet he united in blissful harmony the two things so paradoxical as to seem to cry out against union—dogmatism and mysticism. Dante's mystical theology on every page bears the impress of the mind and heart of St. Bonaventure.

It is not at all improbable that the eight-year-old boy, Dante, saw Bonaventure when he passed through Florence in the entourage of Gregory X, on its way to Lyons to open a general council of the Church. The citizens of every faction, attracted by the arrival of the distinguished visitors, assembled about the Rubaonte bridge. There on 18 June, 1273, the Pope concluded a treaty of peace between the Guelfs and Ghibellines, reference to which is made in *Purg.* XII, 102. The next year, the year in which Dante saw Beatrice for the first time, Bonaventure died at Lyons while attending the first session of the Council—a death that called from the Pope the remark: "A pillar of Christianity has fallen." The funeral, one of the most noted in recorded history, was attended by the Emperor Baldwin of Constantinople, James, King of Aragon, and 1500 prelates and priest. Did the news of Bonaventure's premature death reach the young son of the Allighieri, and did it recall to his memory the picture of this noted prelate, so lately a visitor to the city on the Arno—this man with a figure so erect and dignified, charming in its sympathy and lovable in its attractiveness? It would seem that Dante's meeting of Bonaventure in *Paradiso* recalled such a far distant memory:

Then from the heart of one of those new lights  
There came a voice which made me turn to see,  
E'en as the star the needle's course incites. (XII, 38)

Be that as it may, Bonaventure is placed among Dante's saints by reason of his first and last always seeking the Kingdom of God and His justice, and his giving only second thought to temporal concerns, and perhaps he is the greatest of all the Dantean clergy of post-Apostolic times. The words with which Dante characterizes the greatness of this spirit who, on earth, had united in his various offices whether as a simple monk in his cell, or in commanding positions as orator-

author, professor, Master-General of an Order or Cardinal Bishop, the most tender piety with the most profound learning—Dante's estimate expresses the highest that can be said of any priest—that in his high office he always put last the care of the left-hand, i. e. always made the care of temporal things secondary to the things of the spirit.

Bonaventure's life and soul am I  
Of Bagnoregio, who each left-hand care  
Placed ever far below his office high. (XII, 127)

The spirit selected for the greatest possible service to Dante, the mystic traveller in the invisible world, is not Bonaventure, Dante's ideal priest, nor Virgil, "his sweetest Sire", nor Beatrice, the animated symbol of Revelation still recalling "the dear, pure gentle maiden whose presence and smile awoke to consciousness the slumbering powers" of Dante, but St. Bernard, exalted by the poet as the type of contemplation, though the saint's contemporaries and successors down to Bonaventure had regarded him more as a man of the active life, distinguished especially for his preaching of the second Crusade. Bernard was undoubtedly chosen as the poet's guide on the unitive way because the Abbot of Clairvaux had been renowned as a reformer of ecclesiastical abuses, a mystic the influence of whose thought, animated with love, is seen in many a passage of the Divine Comedy, and above all, because he had been a devoted servant of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

After the vivid personality of Beatrice, that of St. Bernard is the most forcefully visualized in Paradiso. His rôle is to lead Dante to the final consummation of vision, to see God in His Essence. But first he must prepare his disciple for union with the Godhead by disciplining his sight with a revelation of the glory of the saints and, above all, of the Virgin Mother. This part of the poem indeed is a sweet exhalation of the spirit of sermons which Bernard had preached—sermons wherein he had called her "the Sinners' Ladder whose top, like the ladder which the patriarch Jacob saw, touched the heavens, nay passed through the heavens until it reached the well of living waters which are above the heavens;" and again: "Let us seek for grace and let us seek it through Mary; for what she seeks she finds; for she cannot seek in vain." Now he addresses Dante:

Thou son of grace, then said he, this glad mirth  
 In which we live will ne'er to thee be known  
 By fixing gaze on things of lower worth;  
 But to the circles most remote look on,  
 Until thou see the Queen who rules on high,  
 Whom all this Kingdom doth with homage own. (XXXI, 112)

So directed by Bernard, Dante beheld the Queen of Saints in a radiance and glory impossible to reproduce in words. With the capacity of his sight enlarged to contemplate the Divine Light alone, he must still have Mary's assistance. St. Bernard beseeches the favor "in that marvelous outburst of song that exhausts all that can be sung or said in praise of Heaven's Queen, though it seems never to exhaust the admiration bestowed upon it".<sup>9</sup>

O Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son,  
 Lowlier and loftier than all creatures seen,  
 Goal of the counsels of the Eternal One,  
 Thyself art she who this our nature mean  
 Hast so ennobled that its Maker great  
 Deigned to become what through it made had been.  
 In thy blest womb the Love received its heat  
 By whose warm glow in this our peace eterne  
 This heavenly flower first did germinate.  
 Here, in Love's noon-tide brightness, thou dost burn  
 For us in glory; and to mortal sight  
 Art living fount of hope to all that yearn.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*  
 He who stands here, who, from the lowest pit  
 Of all creation, to this point hath pass'd  
 The lines of spirits, each in order fit,  
 On thee for grace of strength himself doth cast  
 So that he may his eyes in vision raise  
 Upward to that Salvation noblest, last.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*  
 Wherefore do thou all clouds that yet impair  
 His vision with mortality remove  
 That he may see the joy beyond compare.  
 And next I pray thee, Queen, whose power doth prove  
 Matched with thy will, that thou will keep his mind,  
 After such gaze, that thence it may not move  
 Let thy control all human impulse bind. (XXXIII, 1)

The grace is granted. Dante, whether in the body or out of the body, he knows not, beholds the Eternal Light. He gazes into the limitless depths of the Divinity. He enjoys the Vision Beatific.

This article began with a quotation from the Holy Father—with another it ends. Not content with making Dante the

<sup>9</sup> Bro. Azarias.

subject of a Brief, his Holiness now signalizes him in an Encyclical addressed to the Doctors and Students of Letters and Arts of the Catholic World. The concluding imperative words of the Encyclical, which constitutes the most glowing papal tribute ever paid to Dante, are as follows: "Love and hold dear this poet whom we do not hesitate to call the greatest extoller of Christian wisdom and the most eloquent of all singers. The more you advance in love of him, the more perfectly will you open your minds to the splendor of truth and the more will you remain constant in the study of holy faith and obedient to it."

Surely after this eloquent exhortation the expediency of placing Dante in its curriculum must be realized by every Catholic college and seminary.

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